

Psalm 27

In 2024, 40 year old Jasmin Parris became the first woman to finish the Barkley Marathon in Tennessee. I'll have to confess I was only maybe vaguely aware of the Barkley marathon before that, but there was a lot of hype surrounding her accomplishment. The story captivated me so I read more about the race.

The Barkley is an ultra-marathon – 100 miles, possibly more. It consists of 5 20 mile – or so – loops in very rugged terrain in Frozen Head State Park in Tennessee. The route changes every year. There are steep climbs and dense underbrush that might require bushwhacking through spots. Briars claw at you and although not commonly seen, there can be bears, snakes, and wild boars. You have 60 hours to finish.

To add another layer of challenge, the trail is largely not marked. No GPS devices are allowed. Runners get a map and a compass to get them from check point to check point. At each check point, a book is hidden, and runners have to tear out the page that corresponds to their number.

Getting lost on the course is a real threat. If you're lost for 30 hours or more, they'll send out a search and rescue team, but until they find you, if you can't find the trail, you're on your own.

In the nearly 40 years since its inception, nobody has died on the course, but only 20 people have finished it.

If you apply to enter the race and are accepted, you receive what's called a letter of condolence from the race director, nicknamed Laz. Laz tells the runners "you have a very bad thing waiting."

Today's Psalm has a disorientation component and for whatever quirky Holy Spirit reason, the description of the Barkley marathon came to my mind. In the marathon, the steep climbs, thick briars, unstable rocks, wild animals, and weather seek to defeat runners. And runners could get lost to boot.

Our Psalmist says evildoers assail me to devour my flesh. An army encamps against me. War rises up against me. And, God seems difficult to find.

We've probably all had times when it seems like everything is against us. That is the stuff of lament Psalms and there's an element of lament in Psalm 27.

But this Psalm makes the turn towards reorientation. If one gets lost In the Barkley, they have a map and a compass to get reoriented.

The Psalmist uses trust as their compass, with God as true north...the Psalmist trusts in their past experience with God. Even now when things look really rough, the Psalmist trusts that God will come through, because God has before.

Here's the thing about using a compass, at least in my experience. The compass will show you north. But if you don't actually know which direction you need to go – if you can't figure out where you are on the map, the compass doesn't actually help too much.

You may be able to set off in the general direction you need to go to get out. But if you don't actually know what you're doing, or you're spatially challenged like me, it won't help you find the checkpoint. It won't help you finish the Barkley marathon.

The Psalm addresses that, too. Teach me your way O Lord, and lead me on a level path. God is the one that can be trusted to lead us out of trouble. But God's not just there to be the true north on the compass...God also teaches us how to use the compass.

Whether you are being attacked by enemies, trying to run the Barkley marathon, trying to navigate life when it keeps coming at you, or just trying to survive, the biggest threat is always going to be fear. This Psalm addresses that in the very beginning.

God is my light and salvation, God is my stronghold...whom or what then shall I fear?

Trust in God is the antidote to fear.

But what does that actually mean on the ground? Honestly, it depends on where you live.

The official United States motto, established in 1956, is "In God we Trust." It's stamped on our money and is displayed on some government buildings.

But is it true? Do we really trust in God as a nation? If we do, I'd say we have some tight limits set around that trust. We don't really trust God for our national security. We have the most expensive military in the world for that.

Some of us don't really know what it would look like to trust God for what we need just to survive a day. Many of us have savings accounts and retirement accounts and home equity to ensure we have daily bread for years to come. Truth be told, that's the American dream. And those who don't have that security forever scramble to somehow get there.

Yet the US and other relatively wealthy countries generally rank much higher in generalized anxiety than poorer countries.

Anxiety tends to be much lower in many of the African countries, like the country Patrick is from. When you live in a subsistence economy, you don't have much choice but to trust that you will get what you need for that day.

People who have traveled to Tanzania or Argentina and Uruguay on a Nebraska Synod trip will often comment about the faith and trust of people who have so little.

So what does it really mean for us to truly trust God? God does not work by magic. God does not seem to drop money from the heavens when we can't pay our rent. God doesn't typically smite our enemies, however much we want that. And although we sometimes hear that someone is saved from an illness or accident by divine intervention, it doesn't always happen that way.

This Psalm does not tell us that life will be a cakewalk when you trust God. There will still be difficulties and struggles, some intense. How do we live in the midst of that without letting fear take over?

It's almost cliché, but true nonetheless. It really does go back to prayer. To sinking our roots deep in God's word, in the Psalms and elsewhere. We pray for deliverance, for rescue, for guidance, for help. Prayer and sinking into God's word is how we learn to use and trust our compass...the compass that points to God as our true north.

And then, we contemplate God's presence. We reflect in silence or write in a journal. We notice what God is doing.

Sometimes I'll pray for days or weeks or months for guidance for a particular matter, and then, maybe on a walk, I'll get a sudden insight. It's usually not the whole answer, but it's a step along the way – a step along a path that looks more level than it did before.

And when we pay attention, we will also be reminded that God most often works through other people. Somebody shows up at just the right time to help us with something that seemed impossible. Or a church group or other group will come through with the help that is needed. A friend will show up, just to sit with us when there doesn't seem to be an answer.

When we remember all the times when God has come through, disguised as another person, two things happen. One, we remember that God can be trusted. It's not just coincidence that that person showed up in the right place at the right time – it's God.

And the second is that we are reminded to pay attention to where God is calling us to show up in the right place and the right time for someone else.

The Psalms were meant to be read or sung in worship...in community. True trust in God can rarely if ever be a solo venture. We forget that.

We think we have to be strong and have strong faith all on our own. But it was never meant to be that way. Life is supposed to be a communal venture, and so is faith.

Nothing in the Psalms or anywhere else in the Bible will tell us life won't be hard, painful, or even dangerous. What it does is give us a choice – we can be overwhelmed by fear, or we can remember the many times God has been faithful...and then trust in God's continuing faithfulness.